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Harvard impasse

After more than a year of negotiations, Harvard University and the Central Intelligence Agency remain at loggerheads over university guidelines restricting CIA activities on campus.

The disagreement — which has implications for every college and university — involves a Harvard ban on faculty members working on secret CIA projects or professors serving as recruiters for the agency without potential recruits being informed that their names are being supplied to the CIA.

The university guidelines do not ban open work for the agency — consulting, research, advising and the like. Only covert activities are forbidden.

The rub is that the CIA says it cannot agree to such restrictions on its activities; that internal restraints already have limited its capabilities and that using faculty members for covert research or recruiting is perfectly legal and well within the bounds of academic ethics. The agency further argues that such clandestine undertakings have been limited, but still are necessary.

The question which bothers Derek C. Bok, president of Harvard, is where the CIA gets the authority to ignore or violate the internal regulations of a private institution. If the CIA can get away with it at Harvard, what is to prevent it

and other federal agencies from embarking on secret programs at other institutions?

In this instance, it seems the CIA is protesting too much. The restriction on covert research was adopted at Harvard last year after the university fully learned about past CIA activities on campus. As for the secret recruiting ban, it seems logical that a university administration would want to resist the practice of professors being paid to supply an intelligence agency with the names of unknowing students who later might be recruited as spies.

With today's sensitivities about academic credibility, it is understandable that the perceived self-interests of Harvard and the CIA would not coincide. Harvard and other institutions should have the right to establish guidelines which address activities deemed inappropriate to their general welfare.

The restrictions are not overly stringent, so in this instance the CIA should be required to demonstrate a compelling need before it becomes free to flout regulations specifically designed to protect a university's academic integrity.